

It is a great pleasure to bring *The Rise of Christian Beliefs* to the public. To scholars and readers familiar with New Testament studies, Heikki Räisänen will need no introduction. Indeed, his earlier books on topics ranging from *Paul and the Law* (1983; 2d ed., 1987) to *The Messianic Secret in Mark's Gospel* (1990) and his proposal to move *Beyond New Testament Theology* (1990; 2d ed., 2000) have done much to set contemporary scholarly discussions on their current paths.

The Rise of Christian Beliefs offers the same rich texture of precise observation and judicious interpretation that has characterized Professor Räisänen's earlier works. The field of vision is now expanded to take in the whole of early Christian beliefs in their historical context. Here a distinctive vision of the task of New Testament theology—addressed to the

interested non-Christian as much as to the Christian, from the perspective of the history of religions—has reached a comprehensive and definitive expression.

Professor Räisänen has also written with general readers and students in mind, providing in initial chapters a discussion of the cultural environment of early Christianity and of the sources at our disposal. To complement the text, Fortress Press has included a historical timeline, maps, and numerous illustrations. Further resources for students and faculty, including study questions for each chapter and a guide to writing research papers, are available on a companion website, www.fortresspress.com/raisanen.

Neil Elliott
for Fortress Press

It is with relief that I give this book up for publishing, for I have been working on it far too long. It is an attempt to put into practice a program that I presented in 1990 in *Beyond New Testament Theology* (SCM Press; second edition, 2000): the program of creating an alternative to “New Testament Theology” by outlining an overall picture of early Christian thought from a history-of-religions point of view. At that time I had already done some preliminary work toward that goal, so that the process of writing the present book has been going on for a quarter of a century. Even so, the product is far from finished. In particular, I could (and perhaps should) still have spent much more time dealing with the boundless new literature—but coping with the mass of publications in all relevant fields is a hopelessly monumental task in any case. I felt that unless I let the book go now, I never would. So, for better or for worse, here it is.

During the process I have had various kinds of readers in mind. I have imagined, perhaps foolishly, that my work might be of interest to quite

different groups—to fellow scholars, to students (undergraduate and advanced), and even to the elusive “general reader.” (It is my conviction that, as war is said to be too important to be left to generals, so the Bible is too important to be left to Biblical scholars and theologians.) The result is that the book is not of a piece. If I have a contribution to make to the scholarly discussion (as I hope), it will be found in chapters 4 to 12, in which I try to paint a big picture of the early Christian thought world. This main portion of the book is preceded by three introductory chapters. Their aim is to locate Christian thought in the world in which it arose (chapters 1 and 2) and give (in chapter three) a general survey of the literature that will constitute the source material of the book. The (elementary) information given in these chapters will hopefully aid the nonexpert to better understand the picture painted in the main part. They also give me the possibility to state some of my own academic judgments, so that I will not have to argue about authorship, dates, and the like in the main part. A reader

xviii with some experience in biblical studies may well skip these chapters and jump from the introduction directly to chapter 4.

In an overall account of a manageable size it is impossible to give detailed reasons for positions taken on various issues. I have had to keep the scholarly discussion brief, though trying to give some space to sketching the “state of the question” at the most important junctures. When my assessment differs from what may be taken as the critical consensus, I make this known. To give the diligent reader the chance to trace my steps and weigh the evidence on which I rest my case, I have included in the notes an overdose of references to my own previous studies.

I could never have finished this book without the help of friends who introduced me to the discussions on the cutting edge in their fields, wrote insightful studies to draw on, commented on drafts of my chapters, shared some of the burdens of administration, or provided personal support and inspiration along the way. They include, among others, Lars Aejmelaes, Ismo Dunderberg, Anne-Marit Enroth-Voitila, Raimo Hakola, Karl-Johan Illman (†), Jutta Jokiranta, Jarmo Kiilunen, Kari Kuula, Risto Lauha, Outi Lehtipuu, Petri Luomanen, Antti Marjanen, Matti Myllykoski, Martti Nissinen, Juha Pakkala, Karl-Gustav Sandelin, Raija Solamo, Kari Syreeni, Risto Uro—but a much longer list could be given. The reader will find the names of many of these persons appearing repeatedly in the notes, but their significance has been far greater than can be directly inferred from my text.

I thank the Academy of Finland for appointing me as Research Professor/Academy Professor for the periods 1984–1994 and 2001–2006. Without this possibility to focus on research it would not have been possible to lay the ground-

work for this book. The Academy also granted my research unit on “Formation of Early Jewish and Christian Ideology” at the University of Helsinki, complemented with a side branch at Åbo Akademi University, the status of a “Center of Excellence” in 1994–2005. The honor was accompanied by certain financial resources that made those years something of a golden age for us. In a sense, the appearance of this book brings the work of the Center to its natural, if delayed, conclusion: it was stated in our plans that I was writing an overall account that would summarize much of the work of the Center. Naturally I am alone responsible for the views presented here, but it is equally clear that on a number of issues I lean firmly on work done by my colleagues and pupils. Nowhere is this more obvious than in my utilization of the texts from the Nag Hammadi library. I have come to greatly appreciate the Christians who produced those texts. My grasp of them remains limited, but if I have understood anything at all, I have to thank Antti Marjanen, Risto Uro, and Ismo Dunderberg for it.

Thanks are due to Adele Yarbro Collins and Gerd Theissen, who acted as external advisors to the Center and also encouraged me in this personal project. Gerd’s pioneering work *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (SCM Press, 1999) has proved an inspiring forerunner; we share the starting point and agree on many crucial judgments, while taking a different methodological approach and also a different stance to the issue of unity and diversity. I thank Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, who organized a scholarly discussion of my program at the Rome meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2001 and edited the volume *Moving Beyond New Testament Theology?* (Finnish Exegetical Society/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), which emerged out of that discussion

and has spurred me to move on. Many other colleagues have strengthened me in my vision; I feel indebted to Chris Tuckett, Sandy Wedderburn, Steve Wilson, and Dieter Zeller in particular.

No scholar of my generation, however, has shaped my academic thinking as profoundly as Ed Sanders. While the influence of his work will be seen throughout this book, Ed has also supported and inspired me in many other ways over the years. At the final stage he kindly scrutinized

several chapters of the book. His penetrating comments led to many improvements and saved me from some mistakes. xix

During all these years, my family has been a constant source of strength, joy, and inspiration. No words can fully express my gratitude.

Finally, warm thanks to the team of Fortress Press, in particular Neil Elliott and Zan Ceeley, for enthusiastic support for the project and tireless efforts to improve it.